

GROWING OLDER, GROWING WISER

BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES

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Theme Essay

Our population is at a new stage; more people are living longer. Barely a generation ago, it was not uncommon for a grandparent to pass away in her 60s, but now life expectancy puts that age in the mid-80s. It is perhaps a mixed blessing, for though medical science and diet and technology can provide the resources for a longer life, not all aspects of being older are pleasant. While we live longer, we still face debilitating, incurable diseases such as cancer, Alzheimer's, and dementia. Indeed, along with Mary Clearman Blew in her novel *Balsamroot*, we wonder what happens when the mind starts to wear out? While modern living has provided many physical comforts, our society is not prepared to care for the elderly as evidenced by the number of homes for the aged, separate facilities where elderly are placed for care and treatment, away from friends, family and community. Age discrimination against senior citizens is a documented fact.

In contrast is the idea that only through living and the experiences that come with it can we become wise. Wisdom is not a certificate or a degree, and it is probably true that any 80-year-old will have more wisdom than a twenty-year-old. Wisdom borne of age and experience is a resource for our society in general and personal terms. As Bessie Delany says, "There's a saying: Only little children and old folks tell the truth." And for some, life goes on as it always has, never seeming to change in any significant way. "No matter how old you get, you don't feel old," writes Wallace Stegner.

This theme, *Growing Older, Growing Wiser*, addresses these issues. On the one hand is the fear and the "inconvenience" of growing older; on the other is the revealed wisdom and confidence of age. Each novel in this series speaks to us as individuals who are part of the growing number of aging and elderly in this country, whether we ourselves are elderly or whether we have parents, grandparents or other relatives who are aging. Reading, reflection and discussion will help address issues such as how we might proceed into this new social structure, where and how we live, and how we relate to the rest of our family and society.

"Growing Older, Growing Wiser" was developed in June, 2000, by Dr. Jeff Fox, College of Southern Idaho.